The Anti-Suit Movement

I don't like wearing suits. In part, this is simply a question of personal taste — I find them uncomfortable and overpriced, and I don't like the way they look. But it's also a question of principle. Suits — and the other trappings of "respect" that go with them, like titles and sir's and the rest — are the physical evidence of [power distance](), the entrenchment of a particular form of inequality.

As a result, when I go to events I try to avoid wearing a suit if I can. But sometimes not wearing a suit just feels really out of place. When you show up to a room of people in suits wearing a t-shirt and jeans, people don't think you're taking a brave stand on principle; they just think you're unkempt.

Yet these things do change. In the 1950s, college kids went to class in suits and addressed their professors as sir. The 1960s changed all that. Today, at most colleges, wearing a suit to class would be the weird thing to do.

This seems like a traditional collective action problem. If one person doesn't wear a suit, they seem weird, but if everyone doesn't wear a suit, they're all fine. But the idea of doing political organizing around not wearing a suit just seems bizarre. It's hard to know who to organize — each event has a different group of people — and even if you could find the people and they agreed with you, asking folks to join a no-suit pact just seems weird.

So suits are emblematic of this strange kind of politico-cultural issue — a political question that's not amenable to a political solution. And yet, from the 1960s, we know that these battles can be won. Does anyone know how?

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